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ABSTRACT

Pre-existing cognitions may influence a child's social perceptions, and the extent of this influence is measured in groups of children from grades 1-6. The children were shown slide shows of congruous (e.g. doctor befriending bullied child) and incongruous (e.g. minister shoplifting) interpersonal behavior. Half of the children saw stories in which the character's identity was established prior to his prosocial or antisocial behavior, the order being reversed for the other half. When tested for immediate recall, virtually all children accurately described the congruous episodes. However, 51 of 96 children distorted behaviors portrayed in the incongruous episodes. This distortion, which was equivalent across presentation order, was significantly related to grade level. Results are discussed in terms of the need for socialization research to include analysis of developmental differences in children's interpretation of social stimuli. (Author/PK)

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CHILDREN'S DISTORTION OF INCONGRUOUS INTERPERSONAL BEHAVIOR: PRIMACY EFFECT OR STEREOTYPES?

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CHILDREN'S DISTORTION OF INCONGRUOUS INTERPERSONAL BEHAVIOR:

PRIMACY EFFECT OR STEREOTYPES?

Summary

Ninety-six children from grades first through sixth observed slide shows of congruous (e.g. doctor befriending bullied child) and incongruous (e.g. minister shoplifting) interpersonal behavior. Half of the children saw stories in which the character's identity was established prior to his prosocial or antisocial behavior, the order being reversed for the other half. When tested for immediate recall, virtually all children accurately described the congruous episodes. However, 51 of 96 children distorted behaviors portrayed in the incongruous episodes. This distortion, which was equivalent across presentation order, was significantly related to grade level. Results are discussed in terms of the need for socialization research to include analysis of developmental differences in children's interpretation of social stimuli.

Is seeing believing, or is believing seeing? To what extent are children's perceptions influenced by pre-existing cognitions? This is the basic question of my current research. Role-taking research (e.g. Selman, 1971; Chandler, 1973), person perception research (e.g. Peevers and Secord, 1973; Livesley and Bromley, 1973), cognitive complexity research (e.g. Crockett, 1965) and research dealing with semantic space and attribute conservation (e.g. Saltz and Sigel, 1976; Saltz and Medow, 1971) all suggest that children progress from less differentiated and organized systems of social perception to systems of greater complexity. Additionally, I would suggest that children's social perceptions may not only be structurally unsophisticated, but may also be prone to substantial distortion.

A plethora of research has been concerned with the effects of television on children's prosocial and anti-social behaviors. Numerous studies have examined the effects of behaviors modelled by parents, peers and other significant others within the child's environment. A substantial amount of literature exists concerning the relationship between the observed behaviors of others directed toward the self and the development of ones self concept. In all of this research, it has been assumed that the stimuli children are responding to are the stimuli defined by the researcher. If, however, children's understanding of social interactions is noticeably discrepant from the perspective of adults, then future research in social cognition and social learning theory should as "what do children see?" before

assessing the impact of these interactions.

The basic paradigm employed in the current reserach consisted of showing children slide presentations of congruous and incongrous interpersonal behavior. The 16 stories which were employed consisted of two sequences. One sequence, consisting of 17 slides, established the major character's identity as either a doctor, a minister, a thief, or a police killer. The other sequence, consisting of 11 slides, portrayed the same character either failing to help an obviously injured accident victim, shoplifting, befriending a bullied child, or returning a woman's misplaced purse. Each child observed a "good" person perform a "bad" act, a good person perform a good act, a bad person perform a good act, and a bad person perform a bad act. The stories were arranged so each child saw each actor and each behavior only once (see Table 1).

In previous reserach I have found that when the majority of grade school children are presented these episodes, they will produce a distorted recollection of the incongruous episodes, while presenting an accurate account of the congruous episodes. For example (see Figure 1) when shown a series of slides which depict a doctor shoplifting a belt, they will claim he bought a belt, or was merely looking for belts but, didn't find one he liked. Whereas, they have accurate recall of episodes in which a thief or police killer perform the same behavior. Similarly, when a thief is shown returning a woman's misplaced purse, they will claim he stole money from it first, or that she was his accomplice and he was giving her stolen money.

While I've found grade level to significantly effect distortion, attempts to explain this grade effect in terms of role-taking and cognitive complexity have not been successful. The current study was designed to test two competing explanations of the observed distortion: (1) that children are focusing on initial information and processing subsequent information in terms of this initial set; or (2) that they process all information and then re-analyze it in terms of pre-existing cognitions.

Very little developmental research has been conducted regarding primacy effects in person perception. Ochs (1973) found an increase in primacy effects among 9 to 17 year olds, with no primacy effect evidenced by the youngest children. However, this probably reflected the older children's better understanding of the traits employed, rather than a developmental change in the effect of an initial set. Supporting this interpretation, Feldman and Allen (1975) using more age appropriate traits, found fifth and sixth graders' attributions were significantly effected by early performance. However, recall of later performance was not assimilated to initial expectations.

Regarding stereotypes, the literature abounds with evidence supporting the existence of children's sex role, age role, cultural, ethnic, and national stereotypes. However, the relationship of these stereotypes to accuracy of person perception has not been assessed.

To assess the relative impact of stereotypic expectations and primacy effects on children's person perception, I presented the previously described 16 stories in two different orders. Half of the sample, which consisted of 96 children from grades one through six,

observed stories in which the character's identity was established prior to his prosocial or anti-social behavior, the order being reversed for the other half.

Immediately after viewing each episode, children were asked to recall who the character in the story was and what he did. Accuracy of recall was scored according to a five point scale (see Table 2). A score of 1 was assigned on the rare occassion when a child seemed to be blocking; a 2 indicated s substantial distortion of facts (e.g. MD--belt: "I saw him pay the man for it"); a 3 indicated the insertion of material (e.g. MD--accident: "He went home to get his doctor's bag so he could help her."); a 4 indicated waivering between (a) accuracy and (b) distortion or insertion; and a 5 indicated accurate recall.

As in past research, children in the current study accurately recalled congruous episodes regardless of the order of the identity and behavior sequences. Considering an accuracy score of 3 or less as indicating distortion, only four distortions occurred out of a possible 186*. In contrast to this accurate recall, 51 out of 93 children distorted either one or both incongruous episodes, resulting in a main effect of type of stimuli, $F(3, 135) = 50.13$, $p < .001$. Distortion was not effected by the order of the identity and behavior sequences. For the stories where the initial sequence established the character's identity, 25 children distorted, whereas, 26 children distorted on the reverse sequence. As indicated in Figure 2, there was also a main effect of grade, $F(5, 45) = 2.70$,

* Due to transcription problems 3 of the original 96 children were dropped from this study.

$p < .05$, and a grade by type interaction, $F(15, 135) = 1.98$, $p < .05$.

Of greatest interest to the present study, only one of the distortions by the children who observed the behavior-identity sequence involved a denial or restructuring of the character's identity. Rather, like those observing the identity-behavior sequence, children maintained consistency by distorting the behavior portrayed. Children did not assimilate later information to an initial set, but processed the entire story, re-analyzing it in terms of stereotypic role expectations.

The rigid application of stereotypic traits to social roles as evidenced in this research, and the conceptualizations of researchers in the areas of role-taking, person perception, cognitive complexity, and semantic space suggests the need for social, cognitive and developmental psychologists to more closely unite their efforts. As Shantz (1975) suggests, a potential meeting ground for cognitive-developmental psychology and developmental social learning theory is the effect of role-taking and person perception on the social stimulus as viewed by the child and the effect of his changing interpretation of social stimuli on processes such as observational learning. Research examining the effects of parents, peers and other significant others (both real and symbolic) on children's socialization should acknowledge the child's interpretation of observed behaviors which may be a function of developmental level.

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TABLE 1

GROUPINGS

	Type 1 (+ -)	Type 2 (+ +)	Type 3 (- +)	Type 4 (- -)
Row 1	Min-belt	MD-purse	Killer-girl	Thief-accident
Row 2	MD-accident	Min-girl	Thief-purse	Killer-belt
Row 3	Min-accident	MD-girl	Killer-purse	Thief-belt
Row 4	MD-belt	Min-purse	Thief-girl	Killer-accident

TABLE 2

ACCURACY SCALE

Score	Description of Criteria
1	Deny with gross blockage (i.e., MD-accident: Full report of MD's behavior until he approached the accident. GAP Then report of MD walking home. Probing not able to elicit any responses related to seeing an accident.)
2	Distortion of basic facts (i.e., MD-accident: "She was stuck in the snow and he pushed her out;" Min-belt: "He tried on a belt and paid the man for it.")
3	Report of basic facts plus insertion of scenes (i.e., Killer-purse: "He took some money before he gave it to her;" MD-accident: "He hurried home and called for help.")
4	Wavering, did not accept basic facts or distort (i.e., Thief-purse:, "I think he stole some money. But maybe he just returned the purse. I didn't see him take any money, but I think he did. But she was smiling so maybe he didn't--I don't know--I guess he didn't. I think he did, he must have.")
5	Accurate recall with no distortion (i.e., MD-belt: "He stole a belt.")

FIGURE 1

Thief

Returning purse

Doctor

Shoplifting

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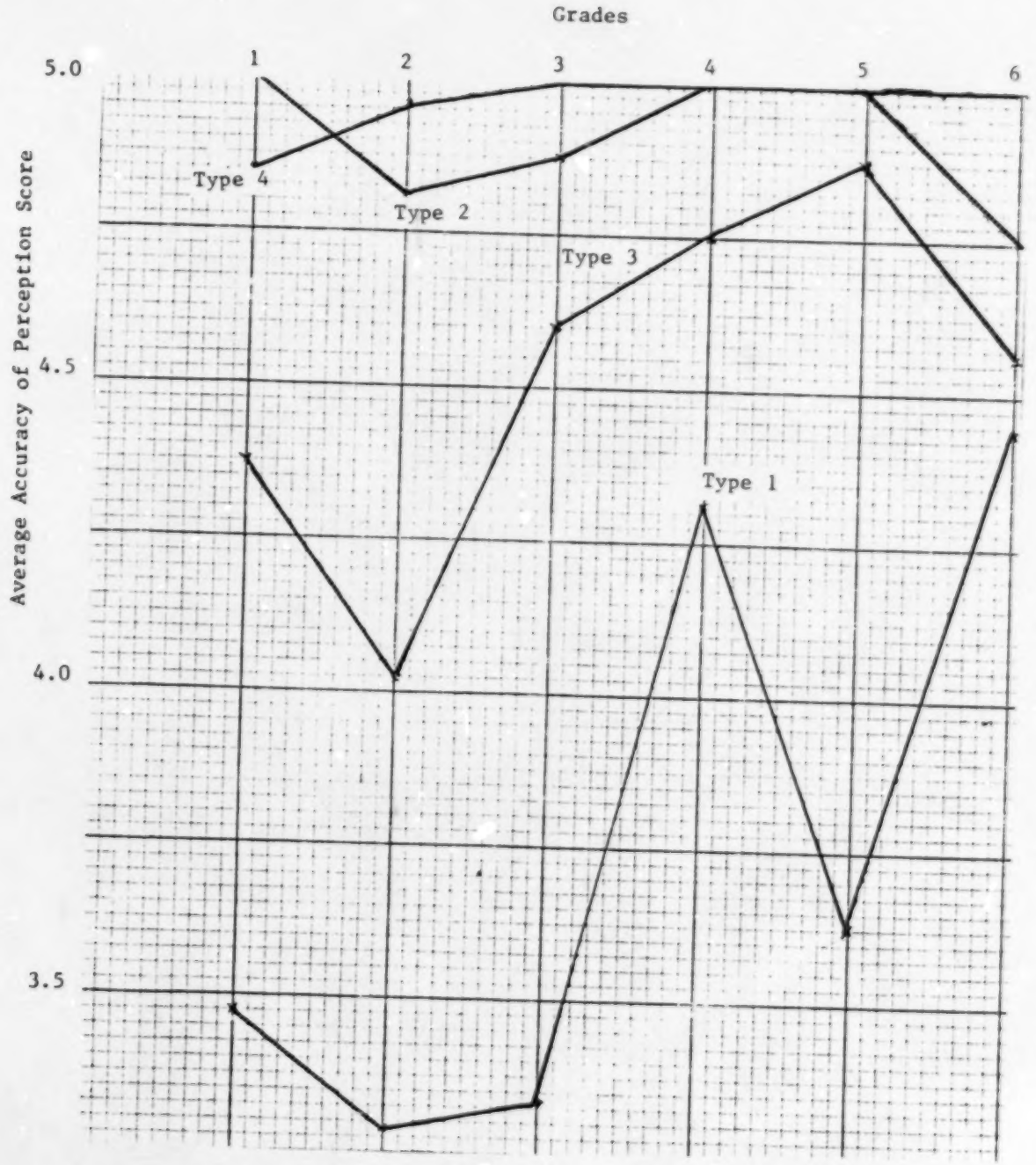
FIGURE 2


Grades
1
2
3
4
5
6
5.0
4.5
4.0
3.5
Average Accuracy of Perception Score
Type 4
Type 2
Type 3
Type 1